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Paine, Paul Mayo

On meeting death

[Syracuse, N.Y.]

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On Meeting Death

On Meeting Death

PAUL M. PAINE

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IT was a week ago this morning that the Titanic went down. Almost nothing else has been seriously talked about or written about since. It seems as though one could never exhaust the subject, so many sided in its aspects, so vast in its dramatic power. There is never a great loss without some gain. Humanity has been ennobled by the thought of the heroism, the sacrifice and the sorrow of the great tragedy; for as Addison wrote in "The Spectator" when some noble play was offered on the London stage, "since there is no one can flatter himself his life will always be fortunate, they may see here sorrow as they would wish to bear it whenever it arrives."

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SUCH has been the effect upon readers of the newspapers of the past week. The front page of every newspaper has suggested to all men who cultivate in their own hearts the generous impulse and the desire for an honorable life to hope that, confronted by so great an opportunity to choose, they too might act the nobler part.

In the famous miracle play, Everyman is first seen a light-hearted and prosperous youth in

the robust enjoyment of the luxuries of life. He does not at first heed the warnings. One by one the companions of pleasure leave him. Deeper and deeper becomes the shadow of the approaching change, until purged of selfishness and worldliness and accompanied by the angel of consolation he steps into the solemn grave. Such was the change which came to the thousand who remained alive on the deck of the Titanic. Not much time was given them, but it was long enough to gaze upon the face of death until they were familiar with it. Hope, at first strong enough, faded. Grim certainty took its place. At length they clung to the sloping deck, strengthened by whatever power each of them could draw from his own soul, until the final plunge, and then they went to death together.



YET at the final summons each man was alone. That is one of the great facts about the trials and tragedies of life, and in particular about the end of life. Each of us, no matter how beloved, has to go solitary to meet death. It is only what one has within him that he can depend upon for aid and comfort in the concluding emergency.

CHANCE determined the fate of many human beings on the great ship. The decision between life and death was not left to them. There was one more woman or child to take that last vacant seat. The man must step aside. The woman, perhaps, who was clinging to him a moment before, begging him to come with her or let her stay with him, must be consoled with whatever kindly sophistries he could muster. He would have his chance in the next boat. He could swim, if the worst came to the worst. The Carpathia would surely pick him up. The life preservers were sound. Maybe the Titanic would not, after all, go down. So he took his place among those appointed to die. It was a chance. It is always a chance. It is only a matter of time. "Do you want to live forever?" once asked an angry officer in desperate battle, seeing his men shrink from a charge which doubtless meant death to most of them and to himself as well. Death cometh soon or late; and how, asked Horatius, can man die better than in facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods?

INSTINCT demands of us the utmost effort for self-preservation. Instinct fourteen years ago overcame manhood on the deck of La Bourgogne. It is true that there were but ten minutes between the accident and the sinking of the ship, and it is unjust to accuse the officers of La Bourgogne, still more so to accuse the French people, of cowardice. But it is not denied that frenzied men fought their way to the boats, nor is it denied that of the 100 women aboard not one was saved. I have heard it said often during this past week that nothing more terrible could be imagined than the sinking of the Titanic. One thing more terrible could have happened, namely, the victory of instinct among the thousand men. One thing more terrible might have happened, the survival of the fittest and the death of the weak rather than the death of the strong; the demonstration that the thousand men were cowards, the death of moral courage.

Then, indeed, we should all have had occasion to weep. For as it was only the bodies of the thousand died; as it might have been the bodies of many would have lived with dead and putrid souls clinging to them as the carcass of the albatross to the neck of the Ancient Mariner. As

it was, the sorrow of the women who came upon the dock of the White Star line last Thursday night was beautiful. "It is a wonderful thing," said one of them, "to think that he died so." Ah, it is not death itself that we need to dread and fear; what we need to fear is that we may fail to meet the crises of life with the courage of men, and fail to go down to death, if we realize its approach, without dismay.

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SUPPOSE the women whose husbands and brothers and lovers said farewell to them out in the Atlantic last Sunday night could be gathered in some great cathedral, under whose high embowered roof the majestic solemnity of music and the consoling ritual of the ancient service for the dead could be offered in all its beauty. Can one imagine himself coming from such a service without having added some new nobility to his life? I say that this great disaster is not all loss, but that it has many aspects of glorious beauty.

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